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SUBJECT: BACK-TO-BACK LEADERS' SPEECHES KICK OFF NZ ELECTION YEAR

¶1. (SBU) Summary. New Zealand's political season is now underway in earnest following the first major speeches of the year by Prime Minister Helen Clark and opposition leader John Key of the National Party. Breaking with established tradition, the PM changed the date of her speech and the location to follow Key's speech in Auckland in hopes of delivering a rhetorical knock-out punch. Instead, Key's speech received more favorable reviews by political pundits and the media. Though both leaders addressed similar themes of education and youth, the press gave Key higher marks on substance and connecting with public opinion. Polls over the next few weeks will determine if voters agree. End Summary.

Key Focuses on Youth Crime

¶2. (SBU) In his first major address of the year, National leader John Key concentrated on criticizing Labour's stewardship of the economy and highlighting New Zealand's income disparity. He stated that a National government would focus more on the quality rather than quantity of government spending to address the country's economy and social problems. Key promised National would be more careful of how the government spends the cash in the public purse than Labour and would reinvigorate the private sector, which Key argues Labour has neglected. On education, Key proposed to retain the high school drop out age at 16, but would offer vocational/technical training courses or further study to 16 to 17-year olds if they chose to leave school. He added a stick to go with the carrot: no welfare payments to youth under 18 if they opt out of his program.

¶3. (SBU) Key's decision to address youth crime received the greatest share of media attention. New Zealand is experiencing a spike in violent youth crime, and the issue is leading current public opinion polls as the most important topic of concern. In his speech, Key outlined initiatives that would provide tougher judicial treatment of juvenile criminals, institute new custodial programs and strengthen those agencies and programs dedicated to preventing youth crime and the rehabilitating youth offenders, including military style boot camps. Key's approach to tackling youth crime is a mix of strengthening the criminal justice system and addressing the root causes of youth offending. While Key advocated lowering the age of criminal culpability and ordering children as young as 12 and 13 into drug or alcohol rehabilitation programs, he also committed to providing more funding to mentoring and parenting initiatives, including Maori cultural-based schemes. (Note: New Zealand's indigenous Maori population is disproportionately represented in its prison system and many youth crimes are perpetrated by young Maori. End Note).

Clark's Speech Mirrors Key's, Except on Youth Crime

¶4. (SBU) The issues addressed in Clark's speech were remarkably similar to those discussed by Key (such that Labour worried that someone may have leaked the substance of the PM's speech to National). Clark talked up her government's economic legacy and stated that under her watch the New Zealand's economy was robust enough to withstand current global economic challenges. She also touted her government's progress in climate change and trade issues.

Like Key, Clark used her opening 2008 salvo to announce new education policies -- including raising the age of compulsory schooling from 16 to 18 and expanding the new apprenticeship training scheme.

¶5. (SBU) A notable divergence from Key was Clark's lack of attention to youth crime, a growing hot-button issue with voters. Other than blaming a previous National Government's budget (1991) that slashed social spending for producing the current generation of hardened juvenile offenders, Clark did not provide the sort of comprehensive policy prescriptions to address the issue as did her political rival. Moreover, Minister of Justice Annette King recently made headlines by downplaying the significance of the youth crime problem, claiming that it is not as important an issue as National has suggested.

Media: First Blood to Key

¶6. (SBU) The media gave higher marks to Key's speech both on substance and fresh thinking. Editorials in New Zealand's two most prominent newspapers - The New Zealand Herald and the Dominion Post - both gave the political advantage to Key. The Dominion Post's editorial applauded the purpose and detail of Key's speech compared to Clark's speech, which the paper noted was primarily a "recitation of historical economic data." The Herald's editors noted that Key's proposals were accompanied by extensive referencing and policy

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research. Clark's speech, they noted, seemed to have been "spiced at the last minute." The same editors also assessed that Key's incentive-oriented education policies are more practical than Clark's compulsion-based initiatives.

Blogosphere Reaction

¶7. (SBU) As expected, the right-leaning blogs applauded Key's speech and generally regarded it as a clean victory over Clark. However, many left-leaning blogs, were not as supportive of Clark. Most contributors to The Standard, New Zealand's leading left-wing blog, were dismissive of Clark's effort, labeling her speech dull and calling it a missed opportunity.

Youth Justice Workers Back Key

¶8. (SBU) Leading professionals in the youth justice field, including the Principal Youth Court Judge, Andrew Becroft and the Sensible Sentencing Trust president Garth McVicar, applauded Key's strategy. The National leader had held meetings with Becroft and other experts prior to formulating his policies, and Key's willingness to defer to the opinions of others paid off in public endorsements, enabling him to show that he is open to broad-based consultation. Clark, on the other hand, received a lukewarm reception for her main education proposals from professionals in that field. Educators welcomed Clark's concern but questioned the practicality (i.e., GNZ funding support) and clarity of her new education policies.

Other Party Leaders Speak to Supporters

¶9. (SBU) Although most media attention was on the Clark and Key speeches, two other party leaders also recently gave their respective first political speeches of the year. On January 20, Green Party co-leader Jeannette Fitzsimmons gave her 'State of the Planet' speech, where she issued a challenge to the leaders of the major parties for more action and less rhetoric on social and

environmental issues. On January 30, the leader of the Progressives Jim Anderton, a junior partner in the Labour's governing coalition, called for middle class tax relief. (Note: Clark has already signaled that such relief will be part of her government's budget due later in the year. End Note).

Comment

¶10. (SBU) In the past and even in an election year, Clark gave her first political speech on the year on the opening day of Parliament, which this year falls on February 12. Her decision to move her speech to the day after Key's and also to Auckland suggests that she regards him as a genuine threat to her re-election prospects. It also underscores the significance to Labour of winning Auckland (where both Key and Clark spoke and where Key has been leading in the polls). Labour's strong showing in South Auckland effectively tipped the balance for Clark in 2005. Clark's avoidance of the timely issue of youth crime reveals that her celebrated sense of being on the right side of popular opinion may have diminished. Key's speech and proposed policies were in contrast to the sometimes unfeeling right-wing rhetoric voters came to expect from the previous National leader Don Brash, and allowed him to be portrayed as a pragmatic centrist. The two speeches from the main party leaders, while similar in subject matter, were essentially a contest of choice versus compulsion. The media claimed Key as the winner in the battle of the speeches; upcoming polls will tell if voters agree. End Comment.

McCormick